

Linking Participatory Poverty Assessments to Policy and Policymaking

Experience from Vietnam

Carrie Turk

Much of the qualitative research about poverty in Vietnam over the past 8 to 10 years was overlooked by policymakers, who tended to view it as "unscientific" and lacking in credibility. So why did the four participatory poverty assessments implemented in 1999 grab their attention?

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Summary findings

The year 1999 was important for poverty-related research and policy development in Vietnam. The General Statistics Office had collected household data in the second Vietnam Living Standards Survey in 1998 and made it available for analysis in 1999. And four participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) were implemented during 1999.

Turk's case study describes how government agencies, donors, and nongovernmental organizations collaborated in implementing the PPAs. The considerable amount of qualitative information about poverty produced in Vietnam over the past 8 to 10 years has rarely grabbed the attention of policymakers, who tend to view such information as "unscientific" and lacking in credibility. By contrast, the PPAs implemented in 1999 have been widely circulated, used, and quoted.

What was different about those PPAs that led their findings to be brought into local and national policy debates, as previous findings had not been?

Working partnerships among donors and nongovernmental organizations were important and helped build consensus on the research findings, but more crucial was the active engagement of government partners from the very early stages. Establishing a Poverty Working Group provided a structure for implementing the PPAs, for feeding analysis through to the poverty assessment, and for keeping government fully involved. The Poverty Working Group now supports the government in drafting its poverty reduction strategy.

Strong World Bank leadership, financial support from the U.K. Department for International Development, the technical expertise and commitment of the PPA partner agencies, and the availability of recent high-quality household survey data played an important part in ensuring the PPAs' credibility.

This paper—a product of the Hanoi Country Office, East Asia and Pacific Region—is part of a larger effort in the region to encourage greater participation by poor households in policymaking and programming for poverty reduction. Copies of the paper are available free from the World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington, DC 20433. Please contact Herawaty Sutrisna, room MC9-242, telephone 202-458-8032, fax 202-522-1556, email address hsutrisna@worldbank.org. Policy Research Working Papers are also posted on the Web at www.worldbank.org/research/workingpapers. The author may be contacted at cturk@worldbank.org. January 2001. (25 pages)

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**LINKING PARTICIPATORY POVERTY
ASSESSMENTS TO POLICY
AND POLICYMAKING:

EXPERIENCE FROM VIETNAM**

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Abbreviations

CAS	Country Assistance Strategy
CG	Consultative Group
CEMMA	Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
GSO	General Statistics Office
HEPR	Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MOLISA	Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MPDF	Mekong Project Development Facility
MRDP	Mountain Rural Development Program (Vietnam-Sweden)
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
PWG	Poverty Working Group
SBV	State Bank of Vietnam
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WU	Women's Union

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LINKING PARTICIPATORY POVERTY ASSESSMENTS TO POLICY AND POLICYMAKING: EXPERIENCE FROM VIETNAM

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Introduction

It is estimated that in the mid-1980's seven out of every ten Vietnamese were living in poverty. A little more than a decade later – a decade of reforms and rapid economic growth – the incidence of poverty has halved. Latest household survey data suggests that 37% of the population is now under the poverty line and 15% of the population is so poor that consumption is inadequate to meet nutritional needs. Social and other indicators have also improved significantly. But many of the newly non-poor households are still nearly poor, hovering close to the poverty line. Their vulnerability to shocks and crises coupled with the recent slowdown in economic growth means that the gains in poverty reduction cannot yet be considered robust.

1999 was an important year for poverty-related research and policy development in Vietnam. Household survey data from the second Vietnam Living Standards Survey had been collected by the General Statistics Office (GSO) the previous year and became available for analysis in 1999. In addition, four participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) were implemented in Vietnam during the year. *The Vietnam-Sweden Mountain Rural Development Program* carried out a PPA in two Districts of Lao Cai Province, an upland area with a high proportion of ethnic minorities living in remote villages. *ActionAid* coordinated a PPA in six Districts of Ha Tinh Province in the north central coastal region, a typhoon-prone area with very poor natural endowments. *Oxfam GB* carried out a PPA in two Districts of Tra Vinh Province, a coastal region with a large ethnic minority population and growing problems of landlessness. In Ho Chi Minh City, *Save the Children Fund (UK)* coordinated a study of three poor, urban Districts of Vietnam's most prosperous city¹.

This case study describes the work that took place collaboratively between Government agencies, donors and NGOs in implementing the PPAs. Although there has been a considerable amount of qualitative information on poverty produced in Vietnam over the past 8-10 years, it has rarely grabbed the attention of policymakers who have tended to view such information as “unscientific” and lacking in credibility. By contrast, the PPAs implemented in 1999 have been widely circulated, used and quoted. It is possible to identify a number of factors that have profoundly influenced the potential to use this participatory research for both program development and policy formulation. These include:

- Leadership and a significant commitment of resources – financial and other – by the World Bank and other donors;

¹ The four agencies named here will be called the “PPA study agencies” for the remainder of this case study.

- Excellent technical capacity and strong relationships with local communities and local authorities in the PPA agencies, combined with an eagerness to engage at the national policy level and to commit resources for this purpose;
- A strong emphasis on ensuring Government ownership of the PPAs through the mechanism of the Poverty Working Group (PWG);
- Availability of high quality household survey data to corroborate and enhance analysis; and,
- Timing.

Policy and Institutional Context

National policy formulation

Poverty reduction and equitable growth are central and important goals of the Government of Vietnam. But the poverty that is often defined in planning and policy documents refers mostly to economic deprivation and limited access to social services. The phrase “poverty reduction” is often equated to Government’s Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) Program, which is a framework of targeted support to groups defined as vulnerable or poor by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA). As such, poverty reduction is often seen more in terms of social safety nets rather than addressing constraints at the macro, structural and sectoral levels.

In theory, participation by poor households in the Government’s planning process can take place through the role that the Party (Communist Party of Vietnam) and the People’s Councils play as their representatives. In some localities with active and consultative leadership, this may work well. In many places – and this was very clear from the PPA research – people rarely felt *informed* about the Government’s plans, less still *consulted* during the formulation stage. Government recognizes the need for greater transparency in its operations and there have been steps forward in the last few years. The national budget was recently published in summary form, for the first time ever. A recent decree stipulates actions which local leadership must take in order to promote grassroots democracy. This insists that communes (the lowest level of the administration in Government) must discuss their plans, budgets and expenditure with households and gain the agreement of the people to these initiatives. There is strong evidence that this decree has not yet been widely introduced. If consultations are not routinely taking place at the commune level, then the possibility of communicating needs and priorities up through the levels of Government to the national policymaking fora is extremely limited. Civil society is underdeveloped and does not yet play an active role in policy formulation.

Ensuring that the poverty diagnostic work, which the planning work can draw upon and refer to, included consultations with poor households, is an important means of feeding their perspectives into the plans. In the context of the PPAs implemented in 1999 in Vietnam, a number of factors were influential in determining the extent of this happening.

First, the timing of the PPAs could hardly have been better from the point of view of influencing policy. The PPAs were implemented to feed into the new poverty assessment (Poverty Working Group, 2000), which was favorably timed to be preceding an important

planning phase in Government. During 2000, Government is drafting its new five-year plan, a new socio-economic strategy from 2001-2010 and its longer term vision to 2020. These plans will be discussed at the 9th Party Congress in early 2001, where decisions will be made which influence the direction that Vietnam takes over coming years. This was the right time to be undertaking poverty-related research work.

Secondly, those making the plans and policies have to have access to the research and find the research credible and plausible. In Vietnam, all Government agencies and all levels of Government – central, provincial, district and maybe even commune – are involved in this planning process. Importantly, Government agencies which are responsible for drafting key parts of the plan were linked into the implementation of the PPAs and the analysis of the findings through the mechanism of the Poverty Working Group (see below).

Thirdly, as described below, the work does not begin and end with the fieldwork and documentation. Having widespread acceptance of the findings within the donor-NGO community was important in presenting a unified external voice to Government on poverty issues. This shared view on the donor-NGO side only came about with extensive preparatory work before the PPAs were implemented. And now, one year after the fieldwork was completed, the poverty working group is still meeting and working collaboratively to translating the poverty diagnosis work into actionable strategies. Without this continuity, some of the more difficult and sensitive issues may have been sidelined.

Local policy formulation

In Vietnam, there is substantial room for maneuver for local authorities to define the local policy environment – some Provinces are known to be more progressive than others because of the way in which they have interpreted central policies to promote growth at a local level. Others are identified as being more conservative and slower to implement reforms initiated at the center, often hampered also by the limited resources at their disposal. All Provinces are required to have their own Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction plans, although the resource constraints often mean that this is restricted to implementing activities funded under the national HEPR. The local HEPRs are not generally based on strong analyses of the local causes and problems of poverty or the important local constraints to development. There is a strong emphasis on collecting quantitative data to inform planning and monitoring exercises but very little experience at the local level in conducting any kind of qualitative research which might broaden policies and programs addressing the needs of the poor. At the local level, definitions of who is poor usually follow guidelines set in monthly per capita income terms by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs. There are also national definitions of vulnerable groups, which may also be non-poor. These factors add up to local policies and programs to reduce poverty which are based on narrow definitions of poverty with a strong economic (and in rural areas, agricultural,) bias. Responses to poverty may, accordingly, only address part of the overall picture.

The PPA agencies were interested in demonstrating to their local authority partners the benefits of opening up direct lines of communication with poor households during the formulation of local policy. They were also keen to see that certain issues raised by poor

households during the PPAs could be addressed at either a policy level or during the development of the Province's Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction plans.

The Origins of the PPAs in Vietnam

World Bank plans a collaborative, participatory poverty assessment

Planning for the PPAs began well in advance of their implementation. The need for a new poverty assessment had been identified by the World Bank in its Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) in early 1998. The first poverty assessment, published by the World Bank in 1995, was based on household survey data collected in 1992/3. There was very limited use of qualitative information and little ownership of the analysis by either Government or the wider donor community. The CAS identified a need to do the second poverty assessment differently. Importantly, the CAS specified:

- That the work would be done in partnership with central and local Government, with NGOs and with other donors and that there would be *one* poverty assessment which could serve the needs of all these groups;
- That the poverty assessment would incorporate qualitative information in a way that would build upon what was already becoming standard practice within the World Bank.

It was hoped that PPAs could be implemented in each of the seven regions of Vietnam, though this turned out to be overly ambitious given the timeframe and range of possible PPA partner agencies. UNDP and SIDA had provided support for the first Vietnam Living Standards Survey (VLSS1) and had agreed to support the second round of household survey data collection (VLSS2). These two donors agreed at this early stage that they would collaborate in producing *one single, shared* poverty assessment, which would reinforce the policy messages emerging from the analysis.

DFID initiates discussions and offers support to the World Bank

At the same time as the World Bank was drafting its CAS, DFID was seeking to strengthen their own understanding of poverty issues in Vietnam and, following the spirit of their recent White Paper on development assistance, was adamant that this should be done in partnership with others. This led to a joint agreement between DFID and the World Bank to work together on a poverty analysis which could influence poverty. DFID provided two poverty specialists, one quantitative and one qualitative, to act as a resource in this poverty analysis work. DFID also provided a trust fund to support the poverty work. The PPAs were therefore backed up by resources and funds, which were unusually supportive and unconstrained. This support was fundamental to allowing the PPA research to be embedded within a wider process at pre-implementation, implementation and post-implementation phases, which in turn generated widespread buy-in to the findings within the donor community and across Government.

Some PPA-related activities already underway

In the meantime, one of the agencies who would subsequently emerge as a PPA partner agency – ActionAid Vietnam - had already received a request from its provincial

Government partners in Ha Tinh Province to help with the development of a provincial Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) plan. They had agreed to support the Province in this request by carrying out, in partnership, qualitative and quantitative studies in the Province. This research took place in summer 1998. A little later in October-November 1998, Save the Children (UK) ran a pilot PPA in Ho Chi Minh City, in part to refine a research plan for a larger PPA which could in turn inform their program strategy in Ho Chi Minh City. At this stage, neither of these PPA initiatives was linked with broader donor objectives of producing a participatory poverty assessment.

Other PPA-partner agencies are sought out

Work then turned towards identifying suitable partner agencies to implement the PPAs. The World Bank, who was leading this exercise, approached NGOs and donors to discuss possible partnerships in carrying out the PPAs. The search for seven suitable partner agencies to implement PPAs in the seven regions involved meeting with more than 20 different NGOs to discuss their interest and capacity in carrying out the work. It was ultimately possible to identify only four partners who were able and willing to implement PPAs. It would have been possible to contract a team of consultants to do the work, but this would have run contrary to the commitment to making the actual fieldwork one part of a much broader dialogue and process of influencing.

Many meetings and informal discussions took place before there was a firm commitment from the PPA agencies. This was the first time that the World Bank had worked so intensively with these particular partners in Vietnam and there was no immediate sense of trust or shared sense of purpose. The PPA agencies had many valid questions about the objectives of the exercise, the connection between the PPA research and their own research plans and programs, the impact that this might have on their relationships with local government partners and concerns over how the output of the PPAs would eventually be used. Ultimately, the PPA agencies were motivated to collaborate because:

- (in some cases) they would have carried out similar participatory research in any case in order to inform their own research, program or advocacy work;
- the links with national (and global) policy-making provided a strong incentive.

The agencies that eventually carried out the PPA research all had a history of poverty reduction work in Vietnam and were keen to use their links with poor communities to inform national-level poverty analysis (Box 1). Because the agencies either all had long term poverty alleviation programs (or, in the case of Ho Chi Minh City, were planning to embark on such work) in the study sites, the PPAs were also important in generating very practical information which could lead to program or local policy formulation activities. The fact that the PPA study teams had their own internal reasons for implementing a PPA was a great advantage. Their interest in producing high quality research which accurately reflected local conditions lay in taking their own program and advocacy work forward rather than in satisfying the terms of a contract.

Box 1: PPA Partner Agencies

ActionAid is a British NGO and has been running long term poverty alleviation programs in collaboration with provincial, district and commune People's Committees since 1990. Their program activities are concentrated in Son La Province, an upland area with a high proportion of ethnic minorities, and Ha Tinh Province, where the PPA took place. ActionAid places a strong emphasis on the use of participatory techniques in program design, monitoring and evaluation.

Oxfam GB is a British NGO with program activities in Lao Cai, Ha Tinh and Tra Vinh, where they have been working since 1995. In Tra Vinh, they are working with local authorities to address poverty in a sustainable manner through a coherent set of sectoral activities. They have a strong advocacy agenda and aim to bring informed arguments for the needs of the poor and marginalised to community, provincial, national and international levels.

Save the Children (UK) is also a British NGO with a distinct program emphasis on protecting and improving the lives of disadvantaged children. Working in Hai Phong, Quang Ninh, three north central provinces and Ho Chi Minh City, their programs combine practical projects at the community level, research, institutional capacity-building and advocacy work to achieve its objectives. They have conducted interesting research into the issue of child labor.

The **Vietnam-Sweden Mountain Rural Development Program (MRDP)** has evolved out of a long history of Swedish support to Vietnam. This began in the late 1970's with support to a paper mill in Vinh Phu (now Phu Tho) Province but then branched into forestry work. Work since then has broadened to cover five Provinces in the northern upland region. This program is one of the first in Vietnam to use participatory techniques on a significant scale.

There was no firm commitment from all four PPA agencies until December 1998 – five months before the PPA teams went into the field in the northern uplands, the north central coast, the Mekong delta and Ho Chi Minh City. In January 1999 there was a meeting with all the PPA partners to decide on the framework for the PPA research and appropriate methodology. The PPA agencies and the World Bank decided at this stage to establish a formal link to the World Development Report 2000 (WDR2000), which was to be on the theme of poverty. As a background to the WDR2000, the World Bank was coordinating a 23-country PPA research project, known as the Voices of the Poor. Members of the Voices of the Poor team met with the PPA agencies, who agreed to adopt a framework for analysis, which would allow findings to feed into this high profile, international research effort.

Government involved through the establishment of a Poverty Working Group

Though donors had agreed to collaborate and PPA partners had made a commitment there was still, at this stage, limited involvement of Government. In February 1999, the World Bank wrote to the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) outlining the intention to establish a *Poverty Working Group* (PWG). This outlined the donor and NGO membership (the World Bank, UNDP, SIDA, DFID and the four PPA partner agencies) and requested that 6 government agencies participate in the group. These were MPI, Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA), Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), General Statistics Office (GSO), Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Affairs (CEMMA) and the Women's Union (WU). At the

suggestion of MPI, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the State Bank of Vietnam (SBV) were added. MPI wrote to the other Government agencies asking them to nominate representatives. Although this meant that the Ministries sometimes nominated individuals who were not necessarily the most open to this kind of work, it meant that there was an *institutional* commitment from these agencies to participate.

The World Bank proposed to MPI that the poverty assessment should be a report of the Poverty Working Group, not just of the World Bank, and that it should be presented and debated at the Consultative Group (CG) meeting in December 1999.

The PWG played a powerful role in bringing the PPA research to the attention of Government policy makers. Many of the Government members joined the PWG highly skeptical of the value of PPAs and this was an important challenge for the PWG. The processes that surrounded the implementation of the PPAs – the workshops, the presentations, the meetings with local Government, the connections with the global Voices of the Poor exercise - were important in establishing the credibility of the research methodology and findings for these members. This was crucial, because the PPAs raised controversial and sensitive issues which Government could have chosen to ignore on the basis that the research was “unreliable” (i.e. non-quantitative).

One whole year of preparatory work

One year after the World Bank had started discussing the need for PPA research in the drafting stages of the CAS, all the key players at a national level had been engaged. Resources were available and a mechanism for collaboration was in place. By making the poverty assessment a joint product of the PWG and putting it on the CG meeting agenda to discussion, it was clear that central Government agencies would be taking a keen interest in the work.

This early planning stage therefore provided:

- Leadership by the World Bank, who took the initiative in organizing, coordinating and designing the work;
- A strong commitment by the World Bank and other donors to using participatory information in the formulation of poverty reduction policy messages in the context of the poverty assessment;
- A commitment of adequate resources for quantitative data collection, qualitative data collection and for a process which would involve key policymakers in the work;
- A commitment to collaboration within the donor community;
- A mechanism to involve Government through the Poverty Working Group and to generate Government ownership through the production of a *joint* report; and,
- Early experiences in implementing PPAs

The Design Process

Techniques and methodology

In January 1999, the PPA partner agencies met together with the World Bank to discuss the scope of the research and appropriate methodology. The decision was made that the research in Vietnam should contribute to the global “Voices of the Poor” exercise and, without dictating the terms of the research, this had some influence over the way in which research was analyzed and documented.

Although each PPA agency took responsibility for planning and undertaking the research in their respective site, it was agreed that all PPAs would use certain techniques and cover certain subject matter in order to facilitate the compilation of a national perspective. In reality, this was not a particular problem since there was a great deal of overlap in the information required for the PPA agencies’ own agenda and the information which would most usefully influence the national and international exercises. Little in the way of methodology was “imposed” on the teams, with the possible exception that the “Voices of the Poor” global exercise required an institutional analysis which, arguably, not all the agencies would have opted to do in the absence of this initiative.

There was no set format for the PPA site reports beyond an agreement that the findings would be organized to facilitate comparability across sites. In practice this meant that the site reports were loosely structured around the format suggested in the process manual for the global Voices of the Poor research. There were no particular complaints that this made the documentation any less appropriate at a local level or that it restricted the field activities unduly.

The process of designing the studies was greatly facilitated by the institutional knowledge and experience of participatory techniques within the PPA study agencies. All of them have been using participatory techniques as a routine part of their program planning and monitoring for many years. In terms of techniques and methodology, there was very little which was added from outside the pool of knowledge existing within these agencies themselves. All teams made use of a variety of techniques including:

- Focus group discussions;
- Semi-structured interviews;
- Wealth/wellbeing rankings
- Matrix and preference ranking and scoring;
- Flow diagrams;
- Institutional ranking and Venn diagrams.

All teams worked with groups of women separately. All teams also interviewed elderly people separately. Two teams made a point of working with children separately. Collectively the four PPAs engaged with more than 1000 households over the course of the studies.

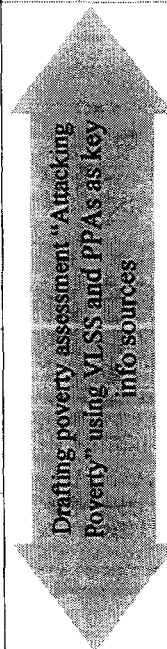
Features of the Implementation Process

Main steps

The main steps in surrounding the PPAs are listed below. It is clear that the *process* of implementing the PPAs was far more comprehensive than simply conducting some fieldwork, which covers the two shaded boxes out of more than 30 tasks listed in Table 1 below. It is this process which meant that findings would be relayed to policymakers and ensured that they would not be automatically dismissed as “non-scientific”. This process was costly and sometimes messy, but made possible because of a clear sense of overall direction and commitments by various donors (significantly DFID’s trust fund at the World Bank, and World Bank/SIDA/UNDP support for implementing the VLSS). Had the process been limited to the two shaded boxes, the link between the PPAs and policymaking would be hard to trace. It is estimated below that the direct costs of implementing the PPAs – the cost of the shaded boxes below - totaled about \$400,000, plus perhaps 3000 uncoded staff days on the part of the PPA agencies and their local authority partners. This was embedded, however, in a process set out in the table below which cost, perhaps a further \$500,000.

Table 1: Linking PPAs to policy development work

	PPA work	Broader work which helped to link PPA work to national policy formulation
During 1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funding for PPAs agreed with DFID - Early PPA work and pilot activities - Commitment by PPA partner agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Background work in planning the poverty assessment, securing donor commitment of resources and donor commitment to a shared poverty assessment - (and 1997) collection of household survey data (VLSS)
Jan 1999	WB and PPA partner agencies meet to discuss scope of research and methodology	Link to global "Consultations of the Poor" research confirmed
Feb 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PPA partner agencies join Poverty Working Group as members - World Bank travels to PPA study sites to request local authority permission for studies 	Poverty Working Group established and workplan – including PPAs – agreed
March – April 1999	PPA research plans drawn up and discussed	March: first meeting of Poverty Working Group to discuss plans to produce poverty assessment based on quantitative (VLSS) data and qualitative (PPA) information
April-June 1999	Training, fieldwork, analysis and write-up	PWG meeting with presentations from some Government members
July-Sept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshop in each of the PPA Provinces to feed back findings (attended by PWG members, especially central policymakers; provincial and district authorities; community representatives; PPA agencies; other agencies active in poverty reduction work in the area) - National synthesis report drafted - PPA site reports finalized, incorporating feedback from workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of quantitative (VLSS) data - National synthesis report submitted to global "Voices of the Poor" research team
Sept 1999	National PPA synthesis report finalized based on final site reports and feedback from the PWG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation and discussion of PPA and VLSS findings to PWG - Participation by 3 PWG members at the Voice of the Poor global workshop
Oct–Nov 1999		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PWG discusses and debates draft of poverty assessment - Changes made to draft to incorporate Government and donor comments



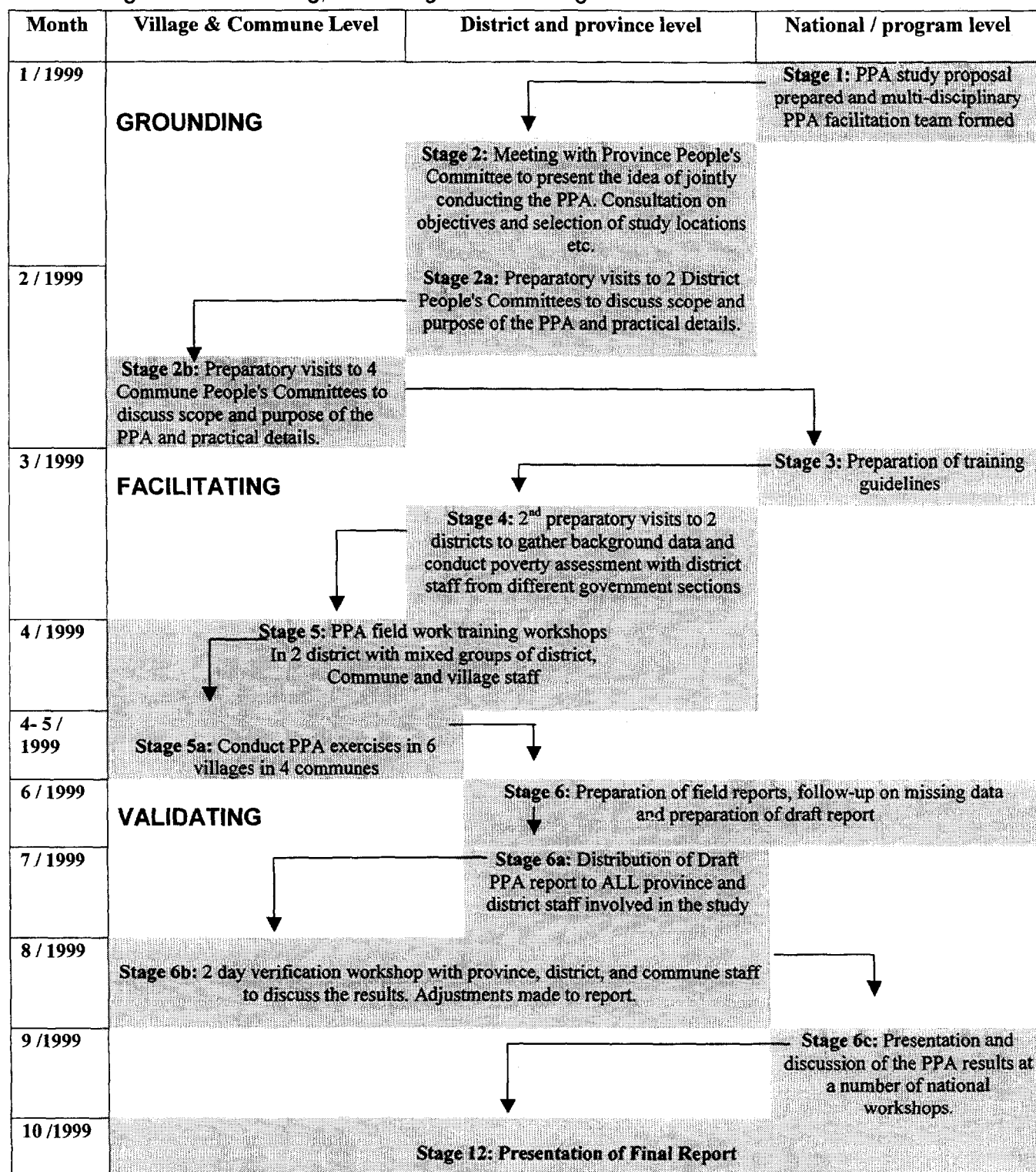
Dec 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Five PPA reports (4 site reports, one synthesis report) published, translated and disseminated widely - Many points presented during CG meeting drawn directly from the PPAs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Vietnam: Attacking Poverty” translated and approved by Government for distribution at the CG meeting. Published and circulated. - CG meeting held. Delegates endorsed “Vietnam: Attacking Poverty” - PWG nominated by MPI to be collaborative forum responsible for helping Government produce a comprehensive poverty reduction plan
Jan-Feb 2000		Government requests help with drawing up poverty reduction strategy. PWG agrees to structure work around this Government request.
March 2000		“Vietnam: Attacking Poverty” is distributed to all National Assembly members and all 61 Provinces
April 2000		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government requests IMF & IMF to make a presentation on requirements for a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) - PWG discusses macro-micro linkages and Public Expenditure Review
May 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshop held with PWG members, PPA partner agencies and local authorities to evaluate impact of the PPAs on different stakeholders and on policy and programs - Government requests help in developing pared-down PPA guidelines/toolkits for local authorities to use in planning 	PWG meets to discuss how framework proposed in “Vietnam: Attacking Poverty” could be used to develop comprehensive poverty reduction plan
July 2000		Three-day retreat held in Sapa (Lao Cai) to start work on Comprehensive Poverty Reduction Strategy (CPRS). Nearly 100 participants from Government ministries, research institutes, local and international NGOs and donors
Aug-Sept 2000		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government taking the lead in drafting CPRS based on many sources of information, but including the PPAs, the quantitative analysis and the findings from the Sapa workshop - regional and national consultations on the draft CPRS
Sept-Oct 2000	Development of PPA toolkit for local authority use in planning	Finalize draft CPRS
Dec 2000		Presentation of CPRS to CG meeting
April 2001		CPRS discussed at the 9 th Party Congress

Reducing the PPA fieldwork to two boxes is not to diminish the effort and resources that went into the PPA fieldwork. Within the shaded boxes in Table 1 lies a whole range of subtasks. These were central to producing good quality research which could be credible to local and national policy makers and which could be useful in informing both the poverty assessment and the development of the partner agencies’ own work.

Diagram 1 overleaf presents the detailed activities that lie within the implementation stage. This is taken from the Lao Cai PPA, but the other PPA studies went through

similarly iterative processes. The example shows how the process is broken down into three distinct phases – grounding, facilitating and validating – which roots the PPA research with local partners, increases ownership and improves the acceptability of findings at all levels. All four agencies were extremely busy with preparatory work, training, fieldwork, analysis and report-writing for a 3-4 month period in 1999. In Ho Chi Minh City, SCF(UK) organized a pilot study to refine the research plan, extending the timeframe of the study. The longest exercise was in Ha Tinh. Here the decision to undertake a PPA in collaboration with local Government authorities was taken prior to any national-level initiatives. From start to finish, the PPA work in Ha Tinh stretched over one year.

Diagram 1: Grounding, facilitating and validating the PPA research



(source: Shanks and Toai, 2000, p96)

Coordination and information-sharing

Though the PPAs were implemented by four separate agencies, the implementation phase was characterized by close cooperation and information-sharing. Through workshops and informal meetings, the leaders of each PPA team were aware of what the other PPA teams were doing and how their studies were progressing. Organizing the PPAs under the umbrella of the PWG and assigning a coordinating role to one agency (the World Bank) was also important in allowing consistency and comparability across the findings.

Ensuring credibility

One of the most important tasks in making the PPA findings credible was to ensure, simply, that the research was of high quality. Agencies with longstanding partnerships with local authorities in the vicinity of the study sites carried out the PPAs. All the agencies have used participatory techniques as a routine part of the program work in the PPA study area for a number of years. Their familiarity with the local area and environment meant that study teams were able to double-check findings which conflicted with other information. This would not have always been an easy task for teams coming into a completely new area and was a great strength of the study teams. Other measures to ensure that findings would ultimately be taken seriously included: an emphasis on triangulation of findings in the field; including the viewpoints of local leadership and ensuring a good coverage (more than 1000 households in total across the four sites) of varying viewpoints to present a balanced picture.

Raising the profile

The provincial workshops were extremely important in establishing local Government support for the studies, for raising their interest in the findings and for addressing their queries and uneasiness with the research. Both the World Bank and the Poverty Working Group were important in this respect. World Bank meetings with local authorities at an early stage raised the profile of the studies at the local level and reinforced to local policymakers the fact that donors and central policymakers took participatory information seriously. All the PPA partners have commented on the ease with which local authorities granted permission to conduct the studies, once it became clear that the World Bank was involved.

The workshops at the end of the PPAs were often quite large – up to 100 participants attended each of them. This was extremely valuable and the attendance of the PWG members and the World Bank was again important because:

- It confirmed to local authorities that central policymakers and donors were taking this kind of information seriously
- It demonstrated to central policymakers that the local policymakers and/or leaders were concurring with the research findings. It is more difficult for central policymakers to reject findings as one-off irregularities supported only by anecdotal evidence from a few households *if* local leaders are agreeing that these findings truly reflect the reality of poor households' lives.
- It solidified the link between PPA findings and policy responses. Many issues came

out of these workshops which were debated vigorously at a local level and then were taken up again at a national level. Examples include:

- Constant concerns expressed by poor households that they lacked information on their entitlements, rights, and activities of local Government;
- Clear evidence of inequities at the intra-household level, especially gender issues;
- The multiple, interlocking disadvantages – economic and non-economic – which confront poor ethnic minority households;
- A need to investigate the processes for levying fees and contributions at a commune level (raised by the Ha Tinh PPA and subsequently taken up in the PER);
- A need to create a local policy environment conducive to the development of off-farm employment opportunities (raised in the Tra Vinh PPA and followed up with a focused study by the Mekong Project Development Facility)
- A need to look again at the status of migrants (discussed vigorously in Ho Chi Minh City and raised in “*Vietnam: Attacking Poverty*” as a pressing issue).

No qualitative information has received this level of profile before in Vietnam, certainly at a national level. Many of these issues have been raised before in good quality participatory research on poverty, but the ability to bring the issues to national policymaking level has been very limited. Associating the PPAs with the work of the PWG and putting resources into a process which draws in local and central policy makers and major donors has been important in drawing the link between findings and policymaking. The commitment shown by the World Bank and other members of the PWG in incorporating the PPA findings widely into *Vietnam: Attacking Poverty* has also brought the findings fully into the realm of policy debate.

Limitations of the design

There is near unanimous agreement on the PWG (and in the wider donor and Government community) that having the PPAs available to inform the national diagnosis of poverty has been extremely valuable and illuminating. There have been certain limitations to the usefulness, however:

1. The four PPAs were chosen to illustrate the problems of the poor in a range of different circumstances. Four studies are inadequate to capture some poverty situations, however. The Central Highlands is an extremely poor area with a particular set of problems, which are overlooked by not having a PPA in this region. This is an important limitation to the PPA findings;
2. Certain vulnerable groups were not really covered in depth in all PPAs (e.g. children) or at all in some PPAs (e.g. the disabled);
3. Many have commented that the information is not representative in any statistical sense. This is, of course, true. It worked very well to use the PPA information alongside nationally representative household survey data. It is difficult to imagine how the PPAs might have been set in the national context effectively and convincingly *without* the household survey data. Attention often focuses on the value

which qualitative data brings to the quantitative data. The experience of the PPAs suggests that the reverse is equally true;

4. Some have commented that the PPAs over-emphasize poverty and negative developments. The study teams did work with wealthier households also, but only with better-off households in the poor areas. Some argued that conducting a participatory assessment with better-off households could highlight the key resources and opportunities, which the prosperous have, but the poor do not have. Though interesting, this was not a priority for the PWG or for any possible PPA-implementing agency;
5. There were often problems with the institutional analysis. Both the standard Venn diagram exercises and the institutional rankings suggested in the Voices of the Poor process guide were unable to cut through the sensitivities inherent in this analysis.

Documenting findings for different needs

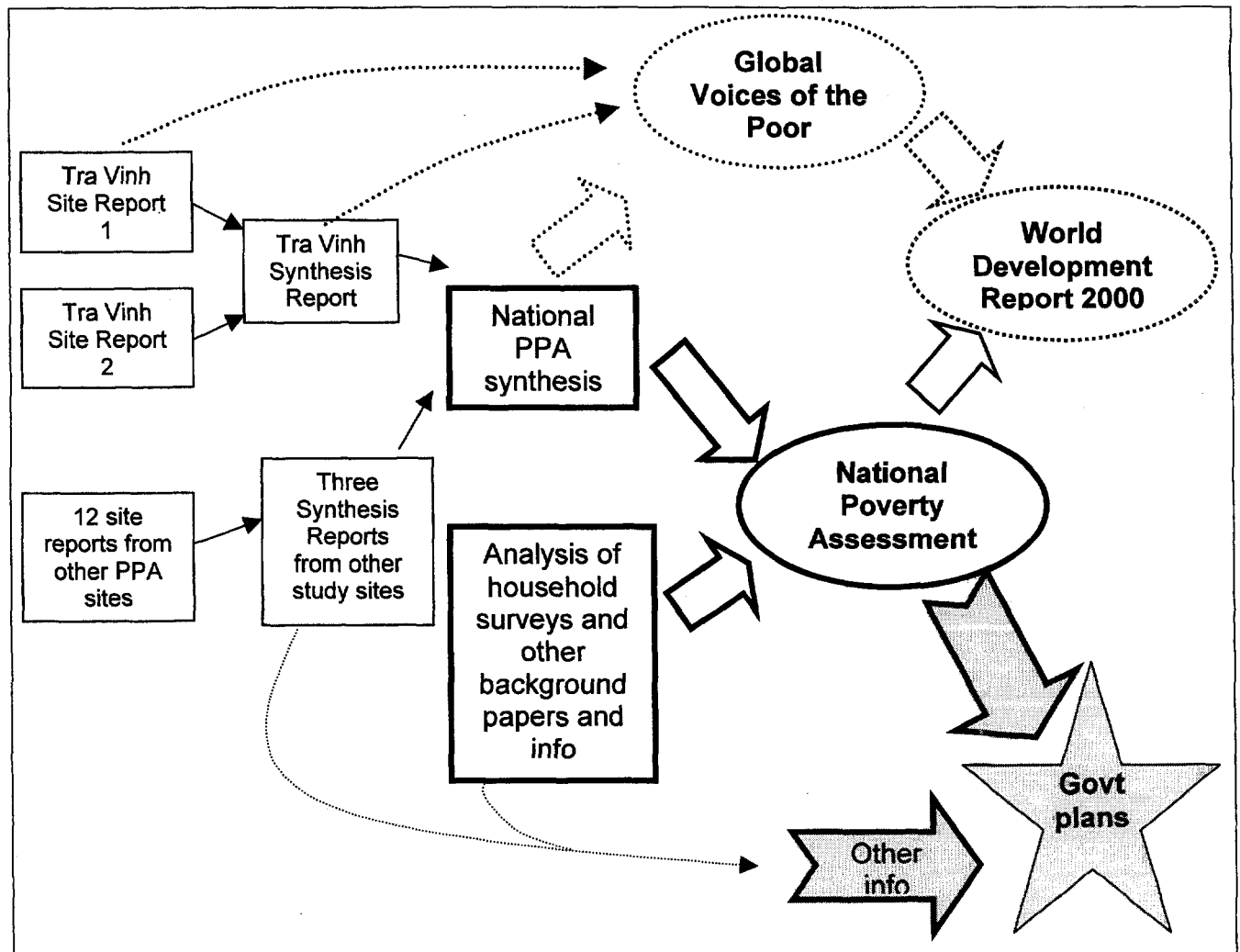
The number of different agencies involved in the implementation of the PPAs meant the output was serving a variety of needs: the PPA agencies' research needs; the Voices of the Poor research needs; local and national Government needs; and, the PWG's needs. Research findings were gathered together to serve this variety of ends (see Diagram 2). PPA study teams wrote up site reports for each district they visited (with the exception of the Lao Cai team, who jumped this step). From this, they drafted their local PPA synthesis reports. These reports, now published in both Vietnamese and English, have been circulated widely within the PPA provinces and nationally. They have served as a basis for local discussions on poverty, informed the programs of local Government agencies and the PPA study agency, and raised issues of importance for local policy formulation.

The national synthesis report takes the four summary site reports and collates the findings. This step was originally included in order to contribute to the Voices of the Poor global research exercise, but has turned out to be a valuable document in its own right. First, for those who lack time to read individual reports, it presents the highlights. Secondly, it provides an opportunity to reinforce findings that arise across the different sites in a variety of different social, economic and geophysical environments. Many of the problems of poverty were found to be just as crucial in Ho Chi Minh City as in remote, upland villages. This in turn helps to respond to some of the criticisms that the PPAs were simply collecting anecdotes that were isolated or extreme cases. Where findings crop up repeatedly, although different research teams in different areas using different methodology are presenting them, it suggests that the analysis is cutting through the biases of any one particular research team. The national report also identifies problems that are specific to particular locations. Thirdly, it made the work of incorporating the findings into the national analysis of poverty and merging it with the quantitative findings much easier. The national synthesis report has been published in both Vietnamese and English and circulated widely.

Diagram 2 shows the many levels of documentation that flowed from the PPAs. The bold arrows that direct the PPA analysis into the national poverty assessment mark the route that brought the PPA findings to the attention of national policymakers. The dotted line to the Voices of the Poor and the WDR2000 exercises indicates a less direct impact at a national level, although the association with these high-profile international studies has

Government comments and feedback were taken into account in the final drafts of the PPA site synthesis reports. But Government involvement in drafting was really far more crucial in the national poverty assessment. This is the document which Government has indicated that they will take as their own and use for their own planning purposes. An abridged version of *Vietnam: Attacking Poverty* (about half the length of the original report) is now being produced and will be adopted as an official document of the Government of Vietnam.

Diagram 2: Feeding PPA findings into national documentation and plans



Findings and Policy Responses

Findings

Themes arising from the PPAs

Very specific findings vary from site to site, but there are a number of common themes that can be identified:

- A near-unanimous recognition that economic wellbeing in rural areas has improved over recent years;
- A strong demand for a greater range of opportunities to develop sustainable livelihoods, particularly those which reduce the dependence on landholdings of reducing size;
- A strong sense of vulnerability to both household-level and community level shocks, with ill health being the single most significant shock which poor households endure;
- Identification of a range of coping strategies which households use to deal with hardship and shock, many of which can be destabilizing for poor households in the longer term;
- A voiced concern about the lack of information about initiatives, plans and programs which affect their livelihoods and a sense of alienation from decision-making processes;
- A number of issues related to intra-household inequity which highlight the vulnerability of children and women;
- A range of gender-related dimensions of illbeing;
- A number of specific policy issues: the status of migrants; the role of the off-farm private sector in rural areas; the way in local fees and contributions are levied; the costs of healthcare and education; the limitations of current mechanisms to consult poor households; and, the limited outreach of formal safety nets.

Links between the PPA findings and household survey data

The PPAs were analyzed and synthesized at the same time as the quantitative household survey data from the second round of the VLSS were being analyzed. There were strong links between these exercises, with much of the analysis for both of these exercises taking place within the World Bank.

Much of the value of the PPAs lies in covering research territory that is more difficult to probe with household survey data. This is demonstrated in the themes identified above, many of which are issues that would not have emerged from the quantitative analysis alone. There is also a useful overlap, though, in the research domains of the PPAs and the household surveys. Where the PPA research themes and VLSS data overlapped, findings from the quantitative surveys and the participatory research usually coincided closely - with a few notable exceptions. Where the findings from the PPAs and the VLSS do apparently contradict each other, there are clearly understood reasons for the difference in results. As such, the differences are not undermining for either the participatory or quantitative research. This opportunity to triangulate the findings from the PPAs with the quantitative data and the general consistency of findings gave both sets of information more credibility, but this reinforcement of key messages is doubtless more significant for

the qualitative research (which, certainly in Vietnam, attracts greater skepticism). Even in these areas of overlap, there was a useful difference of focus between the two sets of information with the quantitative data providing robust, nationally representative trends and the qualitative studies helping to indicate some of the explanation for those trends.

Important areas where findings from the PPAs and the VLSS differed included:

- The socio-economic position of female-headed households, who were routinely described as being poor and vulnerable in the PPAs but which emerge from the data as being better off in per capita expenditure terms;
- The scope and nature of urban poverty, which does not appear to be a pressing problem from the VLSS but which the PPAs suggest could be an issue of importance.

Policy responses: follow-up beyond the final report

Many would agree that most of these issues had been raised in various qualitative and/or quantitative studies over recent years. The difference here, arguably, was that the research was embedded in an influential process, a process that involved many of the important agencies in local and national policymaking for poverty reduction. Though it is still early to have generated dramatic policy change, there are several examples of the PPAs feeding into policy debate in a substantive way.

Broadening the policy debate

A recent workshop of various stakeholders (including central and local policymakers) involved in the PPAs concluded that, for a number of reasons including the short time since the PPAs were implemented, the impact of the PPAs on *policymaking* had been greater than the influence on *policy* to date. The impact on policymaking has come about through:

- Shaping the public policy agenda, broadening the policy debate
- Elevating the status of qualitative research in national assessments of poverty and promoting bottom-up approaches to planning and policy-making
- Creating more places at the national policy-making table and ensuring that voices of all stakeholders are heard
- In addition, one group at the evaluation workshop reported that the PPA had given local levels of Government stronger grounds for identifying “demands” and communicating them to a higher level and noted that the central level had learned more about realities at a local level.

An important first step to generating change lies in broadening the debates on policy. Previously seen as a narrow issue of hunger or income poverty, the PPAs have raised a number of topics which were not previously seen as part of poverty or which were too sensitive for frank and open debate. At the launch of *Vietnam: Attacking Poverty*, one official commented: “*Poverty might mean social or cultural gaps between people. It might mean lack of information, transportation, knowledge, and experience in dealing with hardships. It might mean severe vulnerability, so that health shocks or crop failure lead to a cycle of asset sales and indebtedness. It might mean not being able to influence the decisions that affect your livelihoods. Or it might mean being less advantaged within your own household.*” This represents a real shift in the definition of poverty.

The site reports and local-level workshops have sparked off this debate at a local level and *Vietnam: Attacking Poverty* and the discussions at the CG meeting have really opened up the space for this debate at a national level. Examples of such topics include: how to bring households closer to decision-making processes, how to deal with their lack of information; the need to investigate policies and procedures around revenue-raising at a local level; the need to re-think the status of migrants; the need to look at equity issues within the households and across ethnic groups. Now that these topics are out in the open, in a published document that has the endorsement of Government, there is a sense of greater legitimacy in pursuing these topics in policy formation and program design.

Actual policy change

It is now six months since the PPAs were published and first circulated. *Vietnam: Attacking Poverty*, the poverty assessment that provides a key link between the PPAs and policymaking, has been in the public domain for slightly less time. It is still quite early to expect major policy changes to be in place. There are encouraging signs that many of the PPA findings are filtering through the system and will lead to changes in the future. These early steps are collated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: How PPA findings might translate into policy changes

PPA findings	Policy change in the making
A strong demand for a greater range of opportunities to develop sustainable livelihoods, particularly those which reduce the dependence on landholdings of reducing size (all PPAs)	Study of constraints to the development of the off-farm sector in Tra Vinh (funded by World Bank, UNDP, Mekong Project Development Facility (MPDF) and DFID, conducted by MPDF)
Marginalisation of ethnic minorities in upland areas (Lao Cai and Tra Vinh PPAs)	Study planned, funded by UNDP. To feed into an ethnic minority development plan
A strong sense of vulnerability to both household-level and community level shocks, with ill health being the single most significant shock which poor households endure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High costs of curative health care currently being looked at as part of the health sector review and the Public Expenditure Review Government request to donors to work intensively to help develop a more integrated approach to dealing with community-wide shocks and disasters
A voiced concern about the lack of information about initiatives, plans and programs which affect their livelihoods and a sense of alienation from decision-making processes	Lack of access by poor households to information on legal rights and "knowledge of the poor" included by Government as an issue to be addressed in the poverty reduction strategy
Links between poverty and mechanisms for commune-level financing (Ha Tinh PPA)	Study on fees and voluntary contributions included in the Public Expenditure Review and discussed with Ministry of Finance. This has had an important awareness-raising function and actions are being considered to rationalize the system.
High direct costs of education for the poor	Currently being looked at as part of the Public Expenditure Review

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A number of issues related to intra-household inequity which highlight the vulnerability of children and women ▪ A range of gender-related dimensions of illbeing 	Work by the Government-donor-NGO Gender strategy Working Group strongly informed by PPAs – process followed in producing “Vietnam: Attacking Poverty” seen as a model for work this year in producing a gender strategy
The plight of unregistered urban migrants	In Ho Chi Minh City, some Districts have now changed the criteria for including long-settled unregistered migrants in its Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction activities, primarily those relating to social services.
Various issues in Ha Tinh	Directly addressed in provincial policies and HEPR (including policies on commune-level fees and contributions, and public investment priorities)

Likely influence through the embryonic Poverty Reduction Strategy

As part of the planning initiatives taking place this year, a Government committee under the leadership of MoLISA has been established to draft a poverty reduction strategy to the year 2010. Though the mandate of the drafting committee remains quite narrowly focussed on targeted interventions, the committee is receptive to suggestions from the PWG that this narrower strategy be placed within a broader framework of analysis. The PWG will therefore be helping Government efforts in two ways. First influencing the narrower poverty reduction strategy, bringing the experience of the PPAs and other studies into the proposals of that strategy. The second way in which the PWG will be influencing Government strategic planning will be to help the drafting committee of the Poverty Reduction Strategy to relate the narrower, targeted program to broader initiatives to reduce poverty. This work responds to the Government request made at the CG meeting, which asked the PWG to work on a *comprehensive* poverty reduction strategy. Work on this has already begun. In a recent meeting of the PWG, members have looked at important sectoral, structural and macro issues which influence the creation of opportunities, the promotion of equity and the reduction of vulnerability for the poor.

In July, a three-day retreat was arranged for members of the PWG, other Government agencies, donors and representatives of civil society to brainstorm on the main elements of poverty reduction strategy for Vietnam. There was energetic discussion and debate on important policy measures needed to take forward a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. Sensitive issues such as corruption, ethnic inequality, domestic violence, the status of urban migrants were all discussed openly. Findings from the PPA studies have informed this debate and many feel that they have played an important role in allowing participants to feel more comfortable discussing these issues. The committee drafting the Poverty Reduction Strategy is using the proceedings from the workshop as background material.

Wider Impacts

Strengthening relationships

A very positive aspect of the work in 1999 was the opportunity it offered for agencies

involved in poverty reduction to strengthen relationships and, in some cases, build new links. In particular, the following relationships have been built upon:

- Links between members of the PWG: Government agencies, donors and NGOs;
- Horizontal linkages across central Government agencies working towards poverty reduction;
- Vertical linkages, from the local authorities up to central Government agencies;
- Links between the PPA study agencies and their local authority partners – as one agency put it, collaboration on the PPA with their local partner has “allowed them to participate in local policy dialogue at a more serious level”;
- Relationships between poor communities and other stakeholders by creating new opportunities for the poor to become more active partners in poverty alleviation²; and,
- In some cases, links between local NGOs and/or research institutes hired to participate in the research and local authorities.

Changing Attitudes

The recent workshop that evaluated the impact to date of the PPAs found that *all* stakeholders (that is, poor communities; commune/ward, district, province, and central levels of Government; INGOs; and donors) have experienced significant changes in knowledge, understanding, and attitudes in one or more of the following areas:

- the nature and causes of poverty;
- greater solidarity with or sympathy for the poor;
- increased commitment to consulting the poor;
- better understanding of and/or increased commitment to participatory or "bottom-up" research, planning, and monitoring;
- better understanding of local conditions;
- recognition that inequities were important at the household level, particularly gender-based issues;
- greater willingness to acknowledge sensitive issues, such as domestic violence or marginalisation of some social groups;
- increased demand for better social services and programs; and
- Increased commitment to/demand for participation and grass roots democracy.

Of the many reservations expressed by Government agencies about the use of PPAs in poverty diagnostics, some remain. In particular, the authorities are concerned about the scope for extrapolating a general statement or trend from a few non-representative interviews. That said, many Government representatives have been interested by the findings and have been able to see the value they add to the quantitative analysis. Seeing that donors take the findings seriously – very clear at the CG meeting – helps to inspire confidence in the techniques. The fact that James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, visited two of the four PPA sites on his visit in February 2000 sent a strong message that donors take consultation with poor households seriously.

² This was articulated strongly by 4 out of 5 small groups at the workshop that evaluated the impact of the PPAs. There were no representatives from poor communities at the workshop, but there were representatives from the commune level upwards.

Impact on the PPA agencies

The PPA agencies have noted a number of ways – positive and negative- in which the PPAs and their collaboration in the broader process has influenced their work. Impacts that some or all of them have mentioned include:

- The PPAs demanded significant resources, which were diverted from other tasks;
- The tight timeframe that the broader process placed on the implementation of the PPAs meant that research was conducted more hastily than would otherwise have been the case. This has limited the usefulness of the findings for the PPA agencies own purposes and restricted the capacity-building gains from the exercise;
- It was an important team-building exercise;
- It improved relationships with local NGOs and research organizations who were hired to help with the studies;
- Collaboration with the World Bank in particular and association with the PWG in general has enhanced the credibility of the PPA agencies and their work in the eyes of local authority partners;
- This in turn has allowed the PPA agencies to have greater influence over provincial policymaking than previously;
- The process of collaboration improved PPA agency understanding of how the World Bank and central levels of Government operate;
- There have been a number of program developments linked directly to the PPAs including:
 - The Lao Cai PPA has given impetus to decentralization under MRDP's Agricultural Development Program, allowing districts, communes, and villages some discretion in deciding how to spend budgetary allocations. MRDP's Health Program will use PPA methods for village-level planning, and well-being rankings have replaced wealth rankings in program monitoring.
 - In response to PPA findings, AAV has developed new initiatives to address gender inequities in rural areas.
 - Based in part on PPA findings, Oxfam GB has developed a credit project in Tra Vinh Province and a regional plan for Duyen Hai District.
 - Based in part on PPA findings, SCF is developing a new urban child rights program in HCMC.
 - PPA findings have also informed the development of interventions under a CARE project to assist migrants in HCMC.

Impact on the World Bank in Vietnam

Coordinating the PPAs and the process that brought them to the policy level absorbed a significant amount of staff time within the World Bank. The output has been used in program formulation in a very active way. The Lao Cai PPA is feeding very directly into the Northern Mountains Poverty Reduction Project, which is currently under formulation. The Ha Tinh PPA led to modification in the scope of the Public Expenditure Review and resulting discussions with the Ministry of Finance on the issue of fees and voluntary contributions. The Tra Vinh PPA has led to a commitment of funds for a study on the development of the off-farm private sector. The Ho Chi Minh City PPA has fuelled plans to re-direct the urban sector plans to include a slum upgrading program.

There has been greater acceptance of the usefulness of qualitative information, which has been reinforced by the success of the poverty assessment *Vietnam: Attacking Poverty*.

A remaining challenge: institutionalizing participatory methods

Few are now disputing the value that the PPAs have brought to the poverty diagnosis work or to the planning activities, which build on the diagnosis. The question that now arises is the longer term role for participatory information in future planning and policy work. The PPAs were highly valuable, but also expensive. Some Government agencies have expressed a desire to integrate participatory methods into their work – MoLISA for example is asking for help in developing a streamlined toolkit of participatory methods which could be useful in targeting poor households, informing their program and monitoring the impact of their activities. This is encouraging. Greater openness and transparency by Government, improved information flows, a more vibrant and vocal civil society will all be necessary to create an environment where participatory methods will work. With regards to poverty reduction, this phase of active national and local level planning presents two clear challenges for Government and its donor and NGO supporters. The first is to ensure that the overall development plans and direction are compatible with those needed to generate equitable, permanent and sustainable improvements in living standards for the poor. The second is to ensure that both the overall plans and Government's strategy for Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction, a program of targeted support to the poor which is a very specific component of the overall plan, are as rooted in the realities of poor households lives as possible.

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